

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CONFLICT

the Story of Northern Ireland

Ancient Ireland

Ireland has had a long history of bloody conflicts as a result of invasions and internal divisions. The first major Irish inhabitants were Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who came after 8,000 BC following the end of the 'ice age'. At around 6,000 BC they began to develop agriculture including pottery, stone tools and wooden houses. They also developed megalithic communal tombs many of them astronomically aligned and which remain today, most notably the tombs at Newgrange in Co Meath which were built around 3,200 BC, making them older than the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt and Stonehenge in England. There followed the Bronze Age from around 2,000 BC and the Iron Age from 600 BC. Over the next five hundred years a gradual infiltration of Celtic speaking people occurred, resulting in the establishment of Gaelic culture and Christianity by the fifth century AD.

The English Invasions

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the coasts and the establishment of trading towns. The first of the English invasions occurred in 1167 led by Normans with the entire East coast and a substantial inland foothold being under Norman control over the next century. Progressively English control in Ireland weakened such that by the end of the 15th century it was largely confined to the area around Dublin (the Pale).

From 1536- 1691 Ireland was again subject to a series of English invasions resulting in major and bloody battles. This led to all of Ireland coming under English rule for the first time, though the Catholic Irish refused to be converted to the Protestant religion. From the mid-16th to the early 17th century a policy of land confiscation was carried out with catholic landowners being replaced by Scottish and English protestants (the plantation), particularly in the North of the country (Ulster)

which was accompanied by a major influx of Presbyterian settlers from Scotland. Catholic rights and religion were outlawed by the Penal Laws. There was also persecution to a lesser degree of Presbyterians and dissenters. All of this led to huge Irish antagonism to England which was reinforced by absentee landlords who ran their estates poorly, exported food needed by the local population, and introduced food tariffs discriminatory against Ireland. This contributed to two famines, the second of which (1845-1849) led to mass starvation and emigration with the population reducing from over 8 million to less than 4.5 million.

The War of Independence and Partition

During the 19th century there were various attempts including failed rebellions to

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variously: overthrow British rule in Ireland, gain Catholic emancipation or establish Home Rule under Britain. All were vigorously opposed by unionists who were concentrated in the Northern counties. The years 1916-23 were among the bloodiest in Ireland's history. The 1916 Easter Rising was a militant attempt to gain independence. It was quickly put down but the violence used by the British forces caused a significant shift of public support towards the rebels. This was reflected in Sinn Féin, the party of the rebels, winning three-quarters of the Irish seats in the 1918 British general election. They assembled in Dublin to form an Irish Republic parliament declaring sovereignty over the entire island and being unwilling to negotiate for less with Britain. A guerrilla war ensued (the Irish War of Independence) from 1919-21. A truce was agreed in 1921 leading to an Anglo-Irish treaty creating the Irish Free State, a self-governing independent dominion of the British Commonwealth and including 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland. The 6 Northern and unionist dominated counties were granted home rule, as 'Northern Ireland', and remained part of the United Kingdom. The Anglo-Irish Treaty (and the division of Ireland) was rejected by a major section of the republican movement with a vicious Irish Civil War taking place between 1922 and 1923

before the new Irish Free State government prevailed. In 1937 a new Irish constitution re-established the Free State as Ireland and in 1949 the state declared itself a republic and left the British Commonwealth.

The Northern Ireland State

The two parts of Ireland co-existed on the island but with little political interaction until the 1970s. At the time of partition the Republic was made up of over 90% Catholics and was heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church in its social policies and laws. The minority Protestant population halved over the next 40 years. Northern Ireland was predominantly Protestant but with a sizable (30%) Catholic minority. It was administered by successive Unionist governments resulting in Catholics being denied full voting ('one man one

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vote') in local council elections, constituency boundaries being gerrymandered to increase unionist representation, and discrimination in housing and public appointments. However, many major areas of British government legislation were translated directly into Northern Ireland policy in a non-sectarian way. Both the working class catholic and protestant populations benefitted from the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948. Similarly, the Butler Education Act of 1944 providing free secondary school education for all, was a huge boon to poorer families, fuelling a major growth in grammar school enrolments through selective education based on educational ability. Primary and secondary education in Northern Ireland was segregated between state controlled, largely protestant, schools and the catholic sector; state funded but controlled by the Roman Catholic church. The police force was almost exclusively protestant.

The Troubles

Inspired by the civil rights campaign in the United States, a similar movement for nationalist civil rights was established in Northern Ireland in 1967 which included large numbers of university students and graduates (beneficiaries of the Butler Act) who provided

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powerful and media friendly intellectual argument and analysis unmatched by a staid and relatively inarticulate unionist regime. The civil rights movement demanded social justice and promoted their cause through *inter alia* peaceful marches and demonstrations. This led, in some cases, to violent confrontation with the Northern Ireland government, the police and, ultimately, the British army. It also provided a stimulus for the development of paramilitary activities in both communities; most notably via the republican Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) and INLA (Irish Republican Liberation Army), and the loyalist UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force). Finally in 1972, in the face of increasing public disorder and violence, the Northern Ireland unionist government was prorogued and direct rule from London introduced.

Attempts were made by the British government to establish a power sharing executive including both unionist and

nationalist representatives. This culminated in the 'Sunningdale' agreement of 1973 which also involved the government of the Republic and included provision for a Council of Ireland with the right to execute executive and harmonising functions. The resulting power sharing executive was opposed by extremists from both communities and terrorism, particularly IRA violence, continued unabated. The Executive was short-lived, being brought down in 1974 as a result of a prolonged strike by loyalist electrical power and other workers coupled with widespread intimidation by loyalist paramilitaries. Direct rule was reintroduced and stayed in place for the next 25 years.

There followed a period when British policy was focussed on defeating the Provisional IRA by military means including increasing the role of the locally sourced Ulster Defence Regiment and the police (then Royal Ulster Constabulary). This was paralleled by the introduction of major equality legislation on

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inter alia housing, employment, planning and local government. Despite various half-hearted British government initiatives to bring about local political solutions there was little enthusiasm or commitment on the part of moderate unionists or nationalists to reach an accommodation with the other side. The unwillingness of apparent moderates, despite their rhetoric of inclusivity and tolerance, to seek a genuine and generous accommodation with each other led, almost inevitably, to political extremism gaining ground at their expense. Equally, the main churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant, while condemning violence, engaged in few significant bridge-building initiatives that threatened in any way their respective religious hegemonies. Nonetheless residual violence, interspersed

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with atrocities, decreased gradually over time and by the early 1980s it was clear even to the paramilitaries that the conflict was unlikely to be resolved by military means alone. Indeed it may have been unofficial British policy from that time to ensure that a stalemate should result since neither side was likely to offer compromise or tolerance from a position of perceived strength.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

In 1986 the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement which gave the Republic's government the right to be consulted on Northern Ireland issues, guaranteed equality of treatment of the respective Irish and British identities of the two communities, and promoted cross-border co-operation. The Agreement, like previous attempts to promote change in Northern

Ireland, was opposed by extremists and paramilitaries on both sides as either a 'sell out' or 'institutionalising partition'. Despite the increasing polarisation of the two communities with extremist parties increasing their share of the vote at successive local and British General elections, as a bilateral governmental initiative, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was enforced over the heads of local opposition, demonstrating the limitations of local politicians to block change.

The 'troubles' of the 1970s and 80s severely damaged the Northern Ireland economy and the fabric of its society, with resulting deaths, property and business destruction, high unemployment, low inward investment, increased security expenditure, and regular and persistent disruption of everyday activities. The 1990s saw a gradual realisation by the major protagonists in the conflict that victory on their terms, either through the attainment of

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a united Ireland or a return to unionist majority British rule, was not achievable. There was also increasing weariness within the local population for a struggle which many saw as futile and with negative economic and social consequences for all.

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The Peace Process

Following various secret negotiations and exchanges involving the British and Irish governments, the Northern Ireland parties, and paramilitary organisations, an agreement was reached in 1998 (the 'Good Friday' Agreement) to bring an inclusive executive into being with all the major parties entitled to ministries relative to their voting strengths. The new Executive led by the then leading and relatively moderate unionist and nationalist parties, namely the Official Unionists (OUP) and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), broke down on two occasions partly due to lack of trust but also due to the constant undermining of their achievements by their

more extreme rivals, the Democratic Unionists (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF). Eventually in 2007, following two outstanding unionist demands being met, namely the decommissioning of IRA weaponry and the political acceptance by Sinn Féin of a new and religiously balanced police force, the Executive was reconstituted with the now electorally ascendant and more extreme parties, the DUP and SF, holding the dominant positions.

The Northern Ireland of Today and Its Lessons

Despite various mini-crises, the Northern Ireland Executive has held together since 2007. Its capacity to provide or demonstrate effective or coherent government after 7 years

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is, at best, questionable. There seems little capacity to tackle major issues which have divided the communities in the past nor has there been a willingness to take the difficult economic and other major public policy decisions necessary to chart a sustainable future pathway for Northern Ireland. However, given the bloody history of Ireland and its relationship with Britain, and the intensity of the conflict which paralysed Northern Ireland for nearly 30 years, the comment of Dr Samuel Johnson on a woman preaching comes to mind: «Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all».

What are the major lessons that can be learned from the Northern Ireland 'journey' to a relative, if imperfect, peace? The first obvious truism is that economic prosperity, coupled

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with education and employment opportunities, is of enormous significance in reducing and preventing civil strife. The second and more important lesson is that no society in the modern world can remain stable or free of sectarian tensions unless all its citizens share equality of citizenship. This includes legally enforced equal voting rights; respect for different traditions and religions; and fairness in employment, housing and education. The third lesson is that if moderates on both sides of a conflict do not seek to cross the divide and provide leadership based on mutual tolerance, inclusivity and generosity, the field will be left ultimately to more extreme factions to reach an accommodation. This may entrench, at least in the short term, previous divisions, even if

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they are enacted, as in Northern Ireland, in more peaceful ways.

The quality of life in Northern Ireland is immeasurably better than it was in the 1970s and 80s and the equality of the values and aspirations of the two traditions has been broadly accepted, except in a small number of areas in both communities where economic disadvantage remains prevalent. It should not be unreasonable to expect that in the foreseeable future as new generations develop, a more effective form of governance will emerge, influenced not by historical tribal differences, but by the challenges of globalisation, scientific and technological opportunities, and the shared appreciation of the rich cultural heritage of the region, the island and its people.

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Notes

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